



VOTER REGISTRATION LESSONS FROM MICHIGAN

www.projectvote.org

1-800-546-8683

This Memorandum provides helpful guidance to organizations that are, or plan to, conduct a voter registration program in Michigan. Project Vote, in partnership with Michigan ACORN, ran a large-scale voter registration program that included the cities of Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, Saginaw, and Lansing. This document highlights the most important lessons we've learned along the way.

Make Sure Workers Are Well Trained

Although Michigan's voter registration application may seem simple to complete on first impression, some of the design features have repeatedly confused applicants. For example, a large number of applicants tend to write their name or address below or above the appropriate line. This error, though harmless in itself, often results in the applicant neglecting to write his or her street name on the application. If a voter registration worker or volunteer is not attentive while watching an applicant fill in the blank, the end result may be a fatally flawed application.

Keep in mind that it is very difficult to track down an applicant to correct an application without his or her address. This is why it is important to train workers to catch this and other common mistakes while an applicant is completing the voter registration form. An awareness of common errors can save, not only you and elections officials from a few headaches, but it can save a few votes on Election Day.

Take Advantage of the Ability to Correct Incomplete Applications

Unlike some states, Michigan does not prohibit voter registration organizations from making marks on an applicant's voter registration form. This gives us an added opportunity to assist applicants in completing incomplete applications. Each ACORN office in Michigan employed a quality control specialist whose primary job was to review applications for accuracy and completeness. In the process of going through each application, if a registrant failed to answer a required question (e.g. address, birth date, or ID

number), the quality control specialist contacted the applicant and requested permission to write in the missing information. Again, this may prevent the applicant from being turned away from the polls on Election Day.

Submit Completed Applications Regularly

Staying on good terms with the city or county clerk helps ensure that registrants who apply through your program make it to the voter rolls. For example, clerks appreciate timely and regular submissions of voter registration applications. Though voter registration deadlines are extremely important, clerks quite reasonably find it difficult to process several hundred applications all at once. You should also take into account that an applicant's address may change several weeks or months after submitting an application through your program. Regular, timely submissions ensure the clerk that he or she is processing up-to-date registrations.

Submit Applications to the Correct Jurisdiction

Clerks also appreciate when applications are turned in to the appropriate voter registration office. Voter registration programs should educate themselves whether an application is more appropriately relayed to a local city or county clerk's office. In Michigan, this may involve learning the different zip codes for townships and cities. For example, Mount Morris residents typically write their addresses as "Flint, Michigan", but voter registration applicants for Mount Morris should be forwarded to either the Genesee County Clerk or the Mount Morris Township Clerk—not the City of Flint Clerk's Office. Applications submitted to the incorrect clerk's office may fail to make it to the correct clerk's office.

Little Rock Office

72101 South Main
Street Little Rock, AR
72206

Washington DC Office

739 8th Street, SE
Suite 202
Washington, D.C. 20003

The Significance of Verification

Turning in voter registration applications in a timely manner is important, but ensuring that your applicants are making it to the rolls is equally important. Michigan's online voter registration portal, available at the Secretary of State's website, makes verification an easier process than in other states. Instead of making time-consuming and repeated trips to the clerk's office, you can determine an applicant's status from your office computer. Verification procedures also make clerks aware that you are following the registration process all the way through and that your goal is registration, not merely submitting applications.

In Michigan, the verification process has helped remedy systemic administrative problems that improperly prevent registration. For example, Michigan's Qualified Voter File (QVF) is programmed to register 17.5-year-old applicants who will be eligible to vote in an upcoming election. Some clerks were unaware of this capability and wrongfully refrained from data-entering all applicants who would not turn 18 years old within 30 days of registration. Through our verification process, we were able to catch this problem and help educate clerks on the QVF's features. In addition, both federal and Michigan Law require clerks to process applications that are postmarked by the voter registration deadline. Some clerks who receive applications beyond the

deadline may lose sight of this and refuse to register voters. Engaging in regular verification helps prevent unlawful discretionary decisions and ensures that voters who register through your program are able to cast a ballot on Election Day.

Additional Resources:

"Michigan Voter Registration and List Maintenance Survey," by Project Vote. June 2006. Available at: http://projectvote.org/fileadmin/ProjectVote/pdfs/Michigan_Voter_Registration_List_Maintenance_Survey_2006.pdf

"Policy Brief 4: Ensuring Integrity in Voter Registration Drives," by Project Vote. October 2004. Available at: http://projectvote.org/fileadmin/ProjectVote/pdfs/Project_Vote_Policy_Brief_4_Ensuring_Integrity_in_Voter_Registration_Drives.pdf

For More Information, Contact:

Kerene Moore
Michigan Election Administration Coordinator
Project Vote
(501) 442-1433
electionadmmi@projectvote.org